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THE CINDERELLA SCHOOLS OF LOS ANGELES, 1855-1955

Johns H. Harrington

"No place in the country can possibly need a school more than Los Angeles," commented an ardent writer in an editorial published by the *Los Angeles Star* on February 28, 1852. "We urge upon the Common Council the necessity of taking some steps in this matter at an early date."

Evidently this expression of public opinion brought results, because in the same year the Council levied the first tax in the city of Los Angeles for school purposes, ten cents on every $100 of assessed valuation, and in July, 1852, an ordinance was approved which provided for the first city public schools.

The comment in the *Los Angeles Star,* however, could have been written today just as well as 100 years ago since 37,000 youngsters in spring, 1955, were on half-day and shortened sessions because of lack of classrooms. But, just as the Common Council came to the rescue in 1855, so did the voters of the school districts save the day for pupils, parents, and the community through overwhelming approval of $133,000,000 in bonds for elementary schools, junior and senior high schools, and junior colleges. These bonds will permit construction of 2500 new classrooms for 85,000 young people as well as providing for many other essential educational facilities during the next three years. By 1960 total enrollment in the Los Angeles Schools will surpass 600,000, if only the youngsters of pre-school age already born in the school districts are counted.

Aid in launching what has become the second largest school system, enrollment wise, in the United States was furnished a century ago by Mayor Stephen C. Foster, who might well be described as the father of the Los Angeles City schools. He urged in his inaugural address during 1854 that "first in importance among the needs of our city is education." Following specific recommendations on this topic, the Council appointed Foster first superintendent of schools.

At the present downtown site of the *Los Angeles Mirror* building, the first public school in Los Angeles opened approximately 100 years ago--on March 19,1855 . Located on the northwest corner of Second and Spring Streets "on the edge of town," this first educational enterprise was conducted by Louisa Hayes, sister of a distinguished district judge, and by William Wallace, a botanist who shepherded the

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boys in the ungraded school while Miss Hayes kept a watchful eye on the young ladies.

Sad to say, however, Wallace did not last as a pedagogue. "His meek and mild character could not stand the thorns of adversity which came to him in the shape of complaints made by the boys and girls to their parents, and the parents to the Board of Education, that the school master did not know his fractions."[1] Miss Hayes, however, continued at her post and later married Dr. J. S. Griffin, superintendent of schools from 1856 to 1857.

Despite the remarkable gains made by the local schools within the past century, prospects were not always very bright. For example, in 1876 the Board of Education met to consider discontinuing Los Angeles High School--the city's first institution of this kind--which had begun classes in January, 1873, on Pound Cake Hill. The reason for the crisis was "lack of support of the people and the demands for saving educational funds." However, no official action was taken and Los Angeles High was saved.

Thus do the early pages of Los Angeles history disclose the beginnings of the public schools not long after the start of Yankee rule in California. Although the United States officially took over the state from Mexico in 1848, life in Los Angeles did not quiet down for some time following the hectic days which accompanied the switch in governments and the gold rush. Contemptuously known by her northern neighbors as the "Queen of the Cow Counties," Los Angeles was reported as averaging a homicide every day, even in 1854.

Yet in the midst of this chaos there was a dream for the future in the minds of leading citizens, and part of that dream was a decent education for the youngsters of the pueblo. It is doubtful, however, that even the most optimistic could have foreseen what has become a system of 500 schools with a total enrollment of 500,000. Total residents in the Los Angeles School Districts today outnumber the combined populations of five states, and it is 53½ miles between the two most distant schools in the system. The total area of the school districts, small indeed in 1855 when public education was first born in the pueblo, is now equal to the combined areas of the cities of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.

[1]Laura Everston King, "Pioneer Schools and Their Teachers." *Annual Publications Historical Society of Southern California, 1898.* (Los Angeles: Historical Society of Southern California, 1898), Vol. IV, PC. II, p. 149.

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"Firsts" in the city districts, after the shaky beginning of secondary education, are these: kindergarten, 1876; manual education, 1896; library movement, 1903; night school for adult education, 1907, junior high schoo, 1911; junior college classes, 1912; trade school classes, 1924; first junior college, 1929; and first day nursery, 1931.

Named as leaders in the autumn of 1954 to plan the observance of the 100th birthday of public education in Los Angeles were Dr. High Willett, then president of the Board of Education, and Maurice G. Blair, associate superintendent of the Division of Instructional Services, who was selected as co-chairman. Centennial exhibits were opened at the Central Administrative Offices of the Los Angeles City Schools and at Sentous Center, headquarters for audio-visual services. Displays marking the 100th birthday of the system were installed at the Los Angeles County Museum and used in part for the County Fair. An outstanding contribution to the centennial observance, was the distribution of three historical publications to each school library: "A Study of the Development of Elementary Education in Los Angeles City," by Elizabeth Bates, a former assistant superintendent in the system; "The History of Secondary Education in the City of Los Angeles," by Harry Sargent, formerly a teacher in Los Angeles; and a digest of historical information entitled "Pioneer and Early Public Schools of California and of Los Angeles," prepared by a committee of teachers.

In looking back over 100 years of public education in Los Angeles, it can be observed that there is still a shortage of classrooms, also that there is still great concern for education in the community. Los Angeles may still be in chronological knee-pants compared with older systems throughout the United States, but it is doubtful that any other educational enterprise has grown more remarkably. Young or not, Los Angeles public education which saw its first spark of life 100 years ago has certainly come of age, and the work of pioneer teachers Louisa Hayes and William Wallace has not been in vain.

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